Golf's Apparent Boom May Be Deceiving

WSJ 6/30/95

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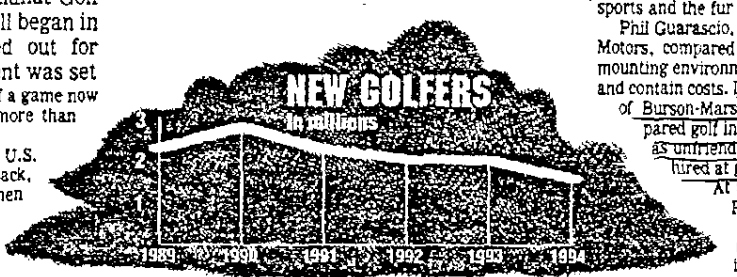
FOR A GAME THAT TEACHES one to swallow emotion, keep flamboyance in bounds and bask humbly in glory, golf seems to be doing an inordinate amount of celebrating this summer. But not without cause. One reason is that it's the 100th birthday of public golf in the U.S., and a week-long celebration is planned July 3-9 at the Van Cortlandt Golf Course in the Bronx, N.Y., where it all began in July 1895. A nine-holer was layed out for $640.80 in a city park, and a precedent was set for public play. That became the backbone of a game now played by some 24 million Americans on more than 15,000 courses – 70% of them public.

Another reason was the centennial of the U.S. Open men's golf tournament two weekends back, which went beyond simple good manners when Tom Kite turned himself in for a two-stroke penalty (his ball had moved), into a festival of Christian family values when Corey Pavin, the eventual winner, knelt in prayer on the 18th fairway, holed out and hugged his wife and two young sons before a TV audience of millions. In a sports era of brawling, trash-talking, greedhead role models, golf's "clean, charity-based image," says Tim Finchem, the Professional Golfers' Association of America's pro tour commissioner, was upheld.

Other reasons to lift a glass: New U.S. golf courses (or 9-hole extensions of old ones) opened last year at a rate of more than one a day. In 1993, Americans spent $10.1 billion on playing fees and $6.2 billion on equipment. Golf is all over TV. The men's pro tour draws record crowds. Stories abound of diehards lining up at 3 a.m. to play a round.



Source National Golf Foundation — Gil Elsner

Golf appears so popular nowadays that author John Updike wondered in print recently whether the game was "stealing our national heart away from gritty, greed-sullied baseball." He doesn't think so, but David G. Price, chairman of American Golf Corp., the U.S.'s biggest golf-course management firm, with 195 courses, does. "You're going to see it happen – golf as America's game," he says.

Most golf-industry leaders aren't so cheery, however. They say there's one problem with the widely held perception that the game is booming: It isn't true.

By their yardsticks, golf's growth – all important to the people in this game for profit, not pars – is flat, static, even "stagnating." With furrowed brows they point to this dark cloud with an enthusiasm for gloom matched only by the dour Scots who invented the game.

The National Golf Foundation, the industry's Jupiter, Fla., umbrella trade group, provides the melancholy statistics: U.S. golfer-numbers peaked at just more than 24 million five years ago; the number of rounds they played dropped to 464.8 million last year, the lowest level in six years; only 1.6 million people took up the game in 1994, the first drop below two million in seven years; women golfers fell to 5.1 million last year from a 1990 high of 6.5 million. Even hardcore golfers, who play 25 or more rounds a year, dropped in 1994 to 5.1 million from 5.5 million in 1993.

Flatness? Sure. Stagnation? We'll see. So far, we're not talking anything close to tennis's nose dive. With unshaven brats and grungewear fashion plates for stars, tennis tanked to 16 million players last year from a mid-'70s high of 30 million.

Some say the NGF's doleful numbers are wrong or that they ignore golf's wonderful future as baby boomers age. Nevertheless, the golf industry has been casting around for causes since the 1980s. It blamed the recession, then the weather, not to mention the end of the Cold War. (The Pentagon used to be the biggest single employer of PGA club pros, but base closings cut military courses to 225 last year from 247 four years ago, and pros on the Defense Department payroll thinned to about 200 during the same period.)

These days the industry blames public perceptions for its nonboom. Expensive surveys, for example, made the incredible discovery that golf is widely perceived to be a game for rich men seeking sanctuary on silvan glades from both family and the great unwashed. These were reasons for taking up the game not long ago.

newsletter

Another discovery, says the golf foundation's newsletter, Golf Market Today, is the perception that it's difficult "to get on the golf course and make it through 18 holes without becoming frustrated." As if frustration wasn't golf's raison d'etre.

Like the game's Calvinist inventors, today's golf-industry leaders apparently love to be told they're bad. At a conference last November, outside speakers told 340 golf-industry leaders, in effect, that golf was the Detroit of sports and the fur of games.

Phil Guarascio, vice president of marketing for General Motors, compared golf today to GM in the '60s, facing mounting environmental concerns and needing to diversify and contain costs. Diane Perlmutter, chief operating officer of Burson-Marsteller, the public relations firm, compared golf in the public's eye to the fur-coat industry as unfriendly to nature – a perception her firm was hired at great expense to turn around.

At the same meeting, PGA commissioner Finchem said golf's health depends on diversity. "Golf must take steps to make itself look like the rest of America," he said. At the moment, says the NGF and PGA, 81% of golfers are male and 19% are female; 41% of them describe themselves as white collar; 38% say they are blue collar. Politically, 45% call themselves Republican, 29% Democrat and 26% independent. Golf Digest magazine estimated that only 2.6% of golfers are African-American. Lots of room for improvement there.

As for the perception that golf courses are habitat-destroying, water-wasting, chemical-eating outdoor pollution carpets, the industry says it's working in several ways to clean up its act, albeit slowly.

In 1990, the U.S. Golf Association asked the New York Audubon Society to administer a program by which golf courses could be certified as nature-friendly wildlife sanctuaries. Five years later, only 37 of the nation's 15,000 courses are certified, with another 1,743 trying to be. The American Golf Corp., (two Audubon certified, 20 working on it), says it practices a "holistic approach to golf-course maintenance," using organic pesticides and fertilizers, recycling waste water, and so on. The USGA held environmental conferences for course operators in 17 cities this spring. Meanwhile, a back-to-nature movement has sprouted among golf-course architects.

But what golf wants fast is perception control, true or not. The industry's leaders last November agreed on "a major public-image campaign capable of repositioning golf as: environmentally friendly and a pleasureable way to commune with nature; easy to take up and learn; appropriate for families young and old," according to Golf Market Today.

In January, Ed Abrain, NGF board chairman, announced that with $200,000 in seed money the foundation had hired Burson-Marsteller to develop a public-relations plan. It's due sometime this summer. Meanwhile, a slogan and logo have been chosen. The logo is a golf tee with a leaf growing out of it. The slogan: "Golf. It's Only Natural."

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/kmdy0004